DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 270 HE 025 063

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TITLE TQM on Campus: What the Pioneers Are Finding.
REPORT NO ISSN-0162-7910
PUB DATE Nov 91
NOTE 6p.
AVAILABLE FROM American Association for Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20036-1110.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)
JOURNAL CIT AAHE Bulletin; v44 n3 p10-13,18 Nov 1991

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; Attitudes; Change Strategies; Cost Effectiveness; Decision Making; *Educational Administration; Educational Quality; Efficiency; *Higher Education; National Surveys; *Quality Control
IDENTIFIERS American Association for Higher Education; *Total Quality Management

ABSTRACT

This article reports survey findings from a comprehensive, critical assessment of quality management initiatives at 22 pioneering colleges and universities. The 83 respondents identified key benefits of Total Quality Management (TQM) and major frustrations and problems. Key benefits included: increased involvement of people; increased listening by staff to customers; increased efficiency; improved climate and attitudes; increased respect for data based decision making; breaking down of campus barriers; improved communication across institutional components; improved focus on institutional mission; reduced redundancies; and improved cost effectiveness. Frustrations and problems identified included: time requirements; unclear commitment by top leadership; aversion to change by some; difficulties in achieving a deep acceptance of TQM philosophy; difficulties in establishing effective teams; and difficulties in identifying tangible results. (DB)

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TQM ON CAMPUS

What the Pioneers Are Finding

by Daniel T. Seymour

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In an address to educators, Motorola CEO Robert Galvin said he likes to talk about quality as being "very first person," that an organization needs to be saturated with people who speak about quality in terms of "I dids." In that spirit, an evaluation of TQM practices in higher education should come from the very people — the "I dids" — who are implementing quality-improvement systems at St. John Fisher, El Camino Community College, the United States Air Force Academy, the University of Wisconsin, and elsewhere.

This article reports survey findings from a comprehensive, critical assessment of quality-management initiatives at twenty-two pioneering colleges and universities. The institutions were chosen as having actual experience in implementing TQM (either institutionwide or in a specific area) and as including community colleges, four-year privates, and four-year publics.

Contact persons were identified who had direct TQM leadership experience at the twenty-two institutions; each received five survey forms and distributed these to faculty, staff, and administrators intimately involved with TQM efforts on that campus. To assure candor, responses were anonymous and confidential (there is no attribution to specific individuals or institutions in this article) and were mailed directly to the principal investigators.

From these eighty-three very first-person accounts, a research report was written (see Note). Of the many questions asked in the survey, two were particularly important: What are the key benefits of TQM on your campus? and What are your major frustrations or problems? It is the answers to those two questions — in the words of the campus practitioners themselves — that are detailed below.

What Are the Benefits?

Giving people a voice. The most clearly articulated benefit from the quality-management philosophy on campus turns out to differ little from what we hear from industry or other service organizations. Almost every survey respondent mentioned that "involving people" in the improvement of their own work environment has a host of positive effects:

"People feel a new emphasis upon their value and input."

"There is a better understanding of . . . each person's ability to make a decision and a difference."

The "empowerment" aspects of TQM deepen an institution's ability to be responsible and accountable for the services it provides — "It drives responsibility and accountability to the lowest practical level of the organization. Often it's the front-line worker." In the final analysis, it is TQM's simple ability to "give people a voice" in what they do that makes it such a powerful philosophy. As a survey participant stated: "Work groups finally have the opportunity to express themselves about matters that they were largely 'voiceless' about in the past."

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Less explaining, more listening. "The focus on customers rather than self-satisfaction has caused staff to stop spending so much time explaining and to start listening to what customers want," is how one respondent put it. A customer orientation shifts the priorities of the institution and its employees from generating policies and rules to generating opportunities to learn about customer expectations and requirements.

The results of the shift are predictable. Once faculty, staff, and administrators explicitly acknowledge the idea of "customer satisfaction" as an index of quality, things begin to change. A number of survey participants cited their own surveys as evidence of the attitude shift:

"There has been improvement in customer satisfaction as documented through student satisfaction surveys, employee questionnaires, community-image studies, and instructional audits."

"Student ratings of teaching effectiveness have continuously improved."

Cutting down steps. Every process or procedure entails a series of steps. One of the most consistently mentioned benefits of TQM is improved "cycle time" (the time required to complete a process) — this by eliminating redundancies,

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reducing the need for inspection checks, merging activities, and so on. This increased efficiency is reported across a range of settings:

"Reduced turnaround time for transfer credit evaluation."

"Cutting down on steps in the bureaucracy, the number of signatures on travel forms and work orders, etc."

A change in climate. "Attitudes" are wispy notions, especially when compared with things such as cycle time. In spite of this, the study respondents believe that attitudes do change as a result of quality-improvement efforts. Some characterized it as a "change in mindset" or simply "improved morale." Others described it as "reduced cynicism and mentality of 'we've always done it this way'." In addition to these perceived changes in the climate of the institution, division, or department, a number of respondents noted more concrete manifestations of climate change:

"Excellent morale. We haven't had a formal grievance in years."

"... less use of sick leave because people feel good about what they do and like to come to work."

Willing to sweat the details. According to many of the survey respondents, decision making in higher education suffers from over-reliance on intuition, tradition, and notions of "this is how we do things around here." The slower, tougher, but decidedly more effective approach — fundamental in TQM practices — is one of "decisions based upon fact." The resulting shift in mindset is apparent: In effect, many in the study see the relevance and importance of data-based decisions growing in their institutions:

"We've observed a definite decrease in 'solution jumping'."

"... as a group, we seem more willing to sweat the details before taking action."

Bringing people together. Colleges and universities are organized into a series of pigeonholes. Department structures and a too-rigid division between business, student, and academic affairs contribute to a sense of disconnectedness. The statement of an administrator at a public institution is indicative of the kind of "barrier busting" that many respondents noted as an important benefit of TQM:

"... bringing together employees from various departments to work on TQM training teams has resulted in networking and personal contact by people who heretofore would not necessarily have a working relationship."

There is, of course, a practical bottom line that goes beyond the social implications of teamwork. Many parts of the critical processes in higher education — registration, general education, enrollment management, and so on — get micro-managed by pigeonholed people. Fundamental improvement requires a coordinated, comprehensive effort by a group of individuals who work in and have knowledge of the extended process. Because of its teamwork orientation, TQM "allows a more complete understanding of entire work processes." It can be a real eye-opener for people when they get "a greater appreciation for the complexity of systems" within which they work.

A common language. A number of respondents highlighted TQM's ability to provide a set of universal principles that make as much sense in an English department as they do in the admissions office or custodial services. As such, "communication is easier since we have begun to talk a common language." Respondents reported TQM counteracted the inclination, when dealing with people from other areas of the institution, to focus on differences instead of commonalities, on personalities instead of processes. A community college pres-

What Processes Have You Targeted?

The tally shown here reveals a broad range of TQM applications — from enrollment management to snow removal, from faculty performance reviews to hazardous waste management.

While it's obvious that quality improvement was most frequently initiated in nonacademic areas, a few institutions are examining the daily management of academic units and teaching effectiveness. For instance, at one college, every department is assessing critical processes within and between departments, "from processes used in recruitment, retention, and placement to work loads, class size, and scheduling."

A second institution has aggressively pursued information on "academic" customer satisfaction. One obvious customer is the student: "A short, descriptive, and analytical customer survey (course and instructor critique) was implemented for every student in every class. Results and diagnostic data are provided directly to instructors." A second customer is the alum: "We're also working on an alumni survey that directly asks how well different programs contributed to our quality goals." An effort also has been initiated to gather data from employers/supervisors (customers, too) regarding their satisfaction with the workplace capabilities of the institution's graduates.

According to these respondents, TQM principles do have significant academic application. Yet conventional wisdom has it that faculty members will resist any effort to change the status quo. Consequently, on many campuses, faculty are not being encouraged to examine culture-changing approaches such as quality management. Is it possible that such stereotyping on college campuses results in a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Processes	Times Mentioned
Registration procedures	XXXXXXX
Mail distribution	XXXXXX
Physical maintenance	XXXXXX
Construction projects/remodeling	XXXXX
Payroll	XXXXX
Printing/copying services	XXXXX
Materials acquisition/purchasing	XXXXX
Custodial services	XXXX
Telephone procedures	XXXX
Admissions evaluations processing	XXXX
Financial aid evaluations processing	XXXX
Grounds care	XXX
Enrollment management/retention	XXX
Counseling/advising services	XXX
Student outcomes assessment	XXX
Student housing procedures	XXX
Career planning/placement services	XXX
Recreational services	XX
Faculty performance review	XX
Freshmen orientation procedures	XX
Faculty evaluation and development	XX
Curriculum development	XX
Snow removal	X
Recruiting faculty	X
Assigning students to majors	X
Office space reallocation	X
Staff parking	X
Annual physical inventory	X
Trash removal	X
Paper flow reduction	X
Area network computer use	X
Development/gift recognition	X
Research receivables	X
Conference and guest services	X
Conducting meetings	X
Warehouse order delivery	X
Placing student teachers	X
Training employees for TQM	X
Hazardous waste management	X
Asbestos inspection and removal	X

ident spoke at length to the topic:

"The common language assists in the normal confrontative situations that arise between various departments and individuals. The staff now has a common language to share their frustrations and their concerns with each other without involving personalities."

Knowing what we are about. It's not just people that get isolated in our institutions; ideas also get lost in the shuffle within larger units and between departments and divisions. One of the key axioms of quality management is the importance of "vision"; most of the institutions or areas in this study have gone through formal vision-statement exercises. Respondents report, "The development of vision statements has resulted in focus and in renewed, vigorous commitment." The process "energizes people" by bringing a sense of synergy, as individuals get "a clearer understanding of what we are about."

The result is a more goal-directed institution or area. One respondent from a state university that has spent considerable time applying TQM to academics stated:

"I think the most important benefit is that our people realize the university is making every possible effort to give students the quality of education that they deserve."

Reduced rework and scrap. It has been suggested by many practitioners that TQM is less about "problem detection" than "problem prevention." By doing things right the first time, institutions do less "rework" (correcting errors) and reduce the cost of "scrap" (not being able to transform input into output). Respondents suggested many examples of how TQM reduced rework and scrap in their institutions; two will suffice:

A respondent in the business division of a college reported that quality-improvement efforts had "reduced the store's [purchasing, warehousing, and equipment delivery] errors by 78 percent," therefore minimizing rework.

An example of academic scrap is the inability of colleges and universities to retain freshmen through to graduation. A respondent from an institution that has been using quality principles in academic and student affairs for almost three years reported it was experiencing a "near 80 percent four-year matriculation rate."

Declining dollars. Almost all institutions say that quality-management principles can increase the efficiency (improve cycle time) and effectiveness (reduce rework) of operations in higher education; a few institutions have seen real dollar savings. The illustrations offered by survey participants fall into two categories: *direct* savings from reducing the costs of an ongoing expense, and *indirect* savings resulting from not having to incur a cost in the first place.

> Of course, campuses are thick with committees; unfortunately, few of them can be described as "self-managed work teams."

A direct saving would be a graduate school's "30 percent decrease in mailing costs" or another institution's reduction in the number of service vehicles (by combining work units) that resulted in "a 28 percent reduction in vehicle lease costs." An example of indirect savings comes from a community college that experienced "$100,000 saved as a result of our parking team's efforts (cost of a new faculty parking lot that was not necessary as a result of the project)."

What Are the Frustrations?

This takes time. As the overwhelming frustration TQM practitioners face, the issue of time manifests itself in different ways: the time required to train people, the time required to reach decisions, indeed the time required to implement a "new way of thinking."

About training: "Training efforts are slow. Getting new people involved is difficult because of 'taking time away from their jobs'." Everyone recognizes the importance of training, but it proves hard to carve out time during the day to devote to a "new way of thinking," especially when the "old way of thinking" continues to produce problems that refuse to go away. The situation requires people, as one respondent put it, to do "double duty."

The use of teams, of course, is fundamental to quality-management efforts. While team activities have numerous positive effects on an organization, consensus building takes more time than decision making by decree. As a study participant described it, "We meet frequently. We debate a lot. We revise constantly. Life would be a lot easier if we were not involved in these activities." Another agreed, saying, "The decision-making process takes longer because of team need for consensus; however," the respondent went on to qualify, "decision implementation is much quicker because of implementors' ownership."

Respondents expressed special concern about the time required to bring about "a new way of doing things":

"The amount of time required to bring about transformation is enormous! We continue to fight fires as we struggle to recognize, let alone standardize, let alone improve our systems."

Part of this "time" frustration is directly related to the choice of projects. "The first projects have taken a long time to complete (eight months and continuing)," was one comment. Another respondent voiced a near-identical concern: "Many of the projects take too long by old-paradigm standards and cause frustration." If project size and complexity can frustrate TQM implementation, then the words of yet another study participant should be heeded: "We need to do a better job of defining project scope before sending off a team to work."

More than lip service. Practitioners appear very "tuned in" to signals from above (or a lack thereof). For example, one respondent reported: "Leadership from the top administration levels is inconsistent, varying greatly from person to person." Another said, "[I am frustrated with the] inconsistency between what senior staff say with reference to QM and what they do."

On occasion respondents expressed almost a sense of betrayal or, at the very least, deep cynicism:

"The President and Leadership Council do not understand quality mechanisms, do not have the level of commitment required, do not understand the importance of this commitment, and are not operating from a specific plan."

There is an obvious tie-in between "this takes time" and "more than lip service." If there is any expectation within an administration for a quality transformation, they need to recognize that a lot of very hard work is required to make that expectation a reality. And the people who are doing the work want to know, indeed need to know, that leadership's commitment is there.

Aversion to change. A significant portion of survey participants are frustrated by the resistance to change on their campuses. Of course, there is the standard resistance from the old guard and "not-invented-here" attitudes. According to many, however, resistance is a direct function of a perceived loss of control: "Management is having a hard time letting go" is how one respondent put it. Another stated, "Supervisors/managers are reluctant to 'let go' of decision-making power because of the need to be 'in control' of all situations."

A problem that some institutions face happens much further along in the transformation process. In the early stages of implementation, those individuals or areas that want to keep things as they are can "hunker down" — figuring this TQM business will pass in time. But as the institution changes, tension increases between practitioners and nonpractitioners. At one institution, many of the campus teams are ready (after three years) to "work on cross-functional processes," according to the president; one key administrator, however, resists all attempts to train her staff. The resulting roadblock has become a nearly intolerable situation.

Getting below the surface. To make quality management viable as an operating system requires a sufficient number of skilled practitioners, a critical mass, spread throughout an area or institution. As people get trained and practiced, the issue becomes that of how to institutionalize TQM: "TQM is more than just a bag of tools and a smile — it's about changing managerial philosophy. Our institution has been, and in my opinion is still, unwilling to deal with culture change."

Part of the problem here might not necessarily be that institutions are "unwilling," but rather they are "unable" to get below surface-level applications:

"We have not learned how to make TQM a part of our regular job."

"It's tough translating knowledge into daily work."

The struggle, it would seem, is to move from *applying* the tools and techniques of quality management to *accepting* its philosophy as the basis for the "way we work around here."

> In the final analysis, it is TQM's simple ability to "give people a voice" in what they do that makes it such a powerful philosophy.

Real teamwork. While "bringing people together" is a major TQM benefit, it can also be fraught with frustration. Colleges and universities, decentralized into isolated departments, centers, and schools, have traditions of "turfmanship" and win-lose interaction; faculty and staff have little consensus-building or conflict-resolution experience:

"[A key frustration is] team leaders and members who have little experience in working with teams. We did not anticipate this or devote enough attention in training to the problem."

Of course, campuses are thick with committees; unfortunately, few of them can be described as "self-managed work teams." Instead, committees often are put in place for the political purpose of ensuring institutionwide representation. While such a committee is "representative," it is not nec[illegible]y "effective." The same problem often surfaces with teams: "Some teams prove to be too large to be practical and not correctly composed of persons directly involved with the problem."

Tangible results. On the surface, many of the benefits derived from a quality-management philosophy have little to do with bottom-line results. In an era in which "cost containment" and "productivity" have become standard parts of the campus lexicon, benefits such as "giving people a voice," "knowing what we are about," and "a change in climate" can seem a bit fanciful:

"The results are hard to quantify. We feel that TQM is good, but it is hard to put your finger on the improvement."

While it might seem obvious that reducing cycle times, scrap, and rework are hard-edged, objective outcomes, some practitioners still feel a pressure to produce more: "Skeptics continue to ask for more definite, tangible results than we have been able to provide."

Has It Been Worth It?

When we asked about the trade-off between benefits versus costs, responses fell into three broad categories.

The first is the "it's too early to tell" group. Within this group is a common theme: Initial costs outweigh short-term benefits. For instance:

"Because we are still so early in the process of adopting quality-improvement techniques and strategies, we are expending more effort than we are receiving in benefits."

"TQM has been extremely costly, particularly when training members . . . [and] the number of identifiable TQM projects has been minimal; therefore, currently, the cost has not been offset by the benefits."

Most such respondents are from four-year institutions; the community colleges in the study have been at TQM implementation longer (averaging more than four years) and have already begun to see some long-term payoffs.

The second is the "unconditional yes" category, which was dominated by two kinds of thinking: one emotional, with a certain zeal and spiritedness, the other a more accounting-ledger approach. First, a comment from an enthused supporter:

"Definitely. This is causing people to think, to challenge their paradigms

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in all areas, and to celebrate change rather than fear it. It has also helped to flatten the decision-making hierarchy."

A more objective cost/benefit analysis was conducted by a number of study participants, who still felt TQM was worth it:

"To date I would estimate that in its two years of implementation, we have invested approximately $100,000 in the implementation process. These are real dollars that have been diverted from the regular campus budget to implement Total Quality Management. . . . I am 100 percent committed to its [continued] implementation . . . it has been worth the money and effort because TQM has greatly improved the culture of the campus."

In the third category — the "conditional yes" — a core group of respondents believes there have been benefits but is unwilling to dismiss TQM's downside. Their "conditional yes" has roots in a specific problem or frustration:

"Yes, but it's much harder than I was led to believe, and it takes longer."

"At the project level, it has been worth the effort because there have been successes and improvements and these make future projects easier . . . [however] with institutionwide issues, it has not, because there is little more than lip service at the top level."

Perhaps the best summary comment is one that reflects the "two steps forward and one step back" challenge facing TQM implementation efforts on college campuses. "We find that we stumble a lot, consult a lot, and finally manage to achieve our objective," a practitioner suggested on the survey, then added, ". . . isn't that the way of all learning?" ■

Note

This article was adapted with permission from the GOAL/QPC Application Report (1991) "Quality Management in Higher Education," by Daniel Seymour and Casey Collett. Copies of the report are available for $10.95 (1-25 copies) and $9.95 (26+ copies) from GOAL/QPC, 19 Branch Street, Methuen, MA 01844; (508) 685-3900.